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C O N F I D E N T I A L KUWAIT 000292

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STATE FOR NEA/ARP

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/28/2017

TAGS: PGOV KDEM KU NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

SUBJECT: CABINET RESHUFFLE LIKELY PRIOR TO MARCH 5 NO
CONFIDENCE VOTE ON HEALTH MINISTER

REF: KUWAIT 258 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: CDA Matt Tueller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Our contacts almost unanimously agree that there will be a Cabinet reshuffle prior to the March 5 no confidence vote on Minister of Health Shaykh Ahmed Abdullah Al-Ahmed Al-Sabah. The Minister, who is also the Amir's nephew, was brought before Parliament February 19 for questioning over alleged corruption and mismanagement in the Health Ministry. According to several contacts, at least 24 parliamentarians support the motion, which needs only 25 votes to pass. If voted on and approved, Shaykh Ahmed would be the first Minister to be removed from the Government through a parliamentary vote of no confidence. According to our contacts, the Al-Sabah leadership is unlikely to risk that embarrassment and may either reassign Shaykh Ahmed to another portfolio or ask him to resign. One Islamist MP predicted the entire Cabinet would resign after their regularly-scheduled weekly meeting on March 4, allowing Shaykh Ahmed to save face and the Prime Minister to appoint a new Cabinet.

¶2. (C) While agreeing on the probability of a Cabinet reshuffle, our contacts disagree on its likely scope. Some suggest the Prime Minister may use the opportunity to replace as much as half of the Cabinet with more technocratic Ministers, rather than those affiliated with a particular political bloc. Others, perhaps more realistically, predict that at most only one or two Ministers will be changed. One liberal contact downplayed the significance of any reshuffle, saying that whether a Minister's name was "Ahmed" or "Nasser" did not matter if the underlying problems were not addressed.

"What we need is a fundamental change in mentality, in the way the state is run," he argued. "We need to choose Ministers based on their competence, not their affiliation to this or that group." Ultimately, he said Kuwait's Constitution should be amended to give more powers to Parliament, a view advocated by several other prominent liberals in recent op-eds.

¶3. (C) Comment: The submission of a no confidence motion against a ruling family member from the main Al-Sabah branch - those eligible to become Amir - is unprecedented in Kuwait and represents a recent trend of more open criticism of the ruling family. Ironically, most contacts claim internal ruling family power struggles are behind the attack on the Health Minister, and specifically accuse Shaykh Ahmed Al-Fahd, the former Minister of Energy and current National Security Bureau President, of orchestrating the questioning and subsequent no confidence motion to undermine the Prime Minister and prove he is still needed in the Cabinet. Regardless of the outcome, tensions between the Government and Parliament are likely to remain high as increasingly assertive parliamentarians continue to try to expand their role in the political decision-making process here. End

comment.

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